

EUROPE'S NEXT BIG IDEA

Nicholas Karides

Ampersand Communications

The European Union is enjoying its lengthiest ever period without conflict. It is also suffering its longest spell without economic growth.

The once unfathomable goal of Europe-wide peace, which it set out to achieve in the aftermath of World War II, and one it sought by pursuing economic integration may not be at risk yet, but the picture is fading.

It is too distant for the older retired generation of Europeans to recall and too commonplace for the young and increasingly unemployed generation to be dazzled by.

Curiously, a young generation of well traveled and well-versed Europeans, abundantly "Erasmused" and "Comeniused", is now being soaked in skepticism and gloom unable to appreciate how far the European Union has come, indifferent to how big a deal it actually is.

If the project itself has lost momentum it is because the leadership has pulled its collective foot off the pedal. Engrossed in their day-to-day Councils, detached from their citizenry, spun by rating agencies, European leaders are drowning in growth and competitiveness verbosity, often misusing the success of the institutions their predecessors constructed for them.

Under the glassed Brussels structures the Union's foundations remain deep and solid but one is beginning to question whether they are strong enough to shoulder their leaders' frailties. Jose Manuel Barroso is no Jean Monnet, Herman van Rompuy is no Robert Schuman and, unfortunately, the next president of the European Council to come from Cyprus is not much of anything.

So, as the Camerons and Sarkozys fight their own corners, restrained by national and party political interests, is there anyone out there able to bang heads, provide focus and steer the group forward? If the manner in which the Greek crisis was handled is anything to go by we must fear for the worst.

There is one institution defying the trend; it has been gaining stature, strength and visibility both practically and legislatively and is emerging as a unifying force. The European Parliament, the closest expression of the will of the European people, confused as that may be, is shaping up as a noisy but healthy counterweight to the democratically elected but more parochial national governments represented at the Council table.

Admittedly Europeans do not rush to the polls when elections for the European Parliament take place every five years but those who do, do so because they want it to matter. And they are not that fewer than those who vote in national elections.

The European Parliament is where, despite the presence of extreme views, the real European debates are now taking place. It is where petitions are filed, hard questions asked and where checks are made and balances kept. A real melting pot where a unifying identity simmers offering Europeans some meaning to the concept of integration. The parliament's recently approved but long fought effort for a Citizen's Initiative on the basis of one million citizen signatures is a significant step in that direction.

Economic cooperation once helped plant the seeds of political integration. Today, it is this context of political integration that must help shape the economic revival. But, as European leaders shrink the assembly of European Parliamentarians must rise to the challenge of developing Europe's next big idea. Their collective democratic legitimacy could prove as valuable as singular leadership.